

BOOK REVIEW
Serious Play
by Michael Schrage
reviewed by Joseph C. Piff

Serious Play is a book about using models, or prototypes, to facilitate innovation. Michael Schrage reviews the various types of models, from simple conceptual drawings displayed in a storyboard format to complex pre-manufacturing working models, and describes the effect they have on innovation and organizations. Two strong themes are presented: (1) models encourage innovation and (2) models affect the person-to-person interactions in the organization, i.e., innovation is more social than personal. Serious modeling will change an organization because the models are the essential tools for managing organizational introspection.

Serious Play is thoroughly researched, with a long bibliography included. Both real-world and anecdotal examples are presented. The conclusion is that innovative models create innovative teams, the opposite of common team-building practice. Models create value. Models reflect an organization's own internal assumptions about risk and reward. According to Schrage, "Playing with a prototype can stimulate innovative questions as surely as it can suggest innovative answers. The best and most powerful models are provocative, and the unexpected questions that a model raises are sometimes far more important than the explicit questions it was designed to answer."

At what point in the product development/modeling process do you involve your customer? Early or well after senior management approval? Schrage strongly encourages early involvement of the customer of the innovation because ideas about what is desired will change during the serious play. The models encourage trade-off negotiation – the purpose of the models is to identify options.

So why should the whole NFFTIO organization read this book? Schrage states that "Hewlett-Packard also lets its new-product decision be influenced by mavericks who have gone outside traditional channels to successfully demo prototypes to key customers." Are you identifying promising S&T solutions to Fleet/Force problems and getting them evaluated by Naval personnel? Who are our mavericks?

The book concludes with a "User's Guide." In his Preface, Schrage writes, "Like a good prototype or simulation, this book was written to be used, not just read."